ETHICS FOR MODERN CHRISTIANS
PART I
MICAH 6:6-8
LUKE 16:19-31

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LAFAYETTE, INDIANA
OCTOBER 8, 1972

The trouble with talking about Christian Ethics today is that we must do so in a situation quite unlike anything the church has had to face before. And because of that, most of the public articulations of standards for Christicn behavior, and most of what I hear people saying that falls in the category of morality, sounds as if it is 1872 and not 1972, and is thus irrelevant, out of date, and not taken very seriously by anyone.

Every so often I envy the simplicity of the past, particularly in the area of ethics. It may not have been comfortable living on the American frontier, but the moral decisions a man had to make were straight forward and easy. Right was right, and wrong was wrong, and more importantly there was a general consensus regarding which was which.

-1/ Now, I expect that's an oversimplification: and that men did struggle with ethical decisions one hundred years ago. In fact, one of the incidents cited in a recent study of Situation Ethics poses the problem of a family hiding from a band of marauding Indians on the frontier. The mother is holding an infant - her other children are scattered about in the woods: the infant begins to cry. Shall she allow the infant to cry, thereby revealing the fact that they are hiding, resulting in the death of the whole family? Or shall she restrain the infant - even if it is smothered in the process? That's the kind of dramatic illustration spokesmen for the situational nature of all ethical decisions love to hold up. Obviously it is not a routine question - a normal daily circumstance. But, it could have happened and probably did and it serves to illustrate that our fore-fathers had to work through some sticky moral dilemmas too.

And yet, in many ways, it was simpler then. - we perceive that it was simpler And that simplicity has been glamorized and exaggerated in the classically nostalgic American morality play - more commonly known as the Hollywood Western. One of its patriarchs - Tom Mix - died recently: my favorite was Roy Rogers - and there were many of them. In their world things were primal and simple: Evil could be wrapped up in one neat bundle; a mean, dirty low-down, unshaven, stage coach robber,who rolled cigarettes, drank whiskey, abused both women and horses, and generally walked all over everybody. Likewise, good could similarly be expressed in an opposite caricature - Tom Mix, Roy Rogers, etc. -a tall, clean shaven, neatly attired gentleman, who could stand at the bar without getting drunk, whose relationship with women was totally

platonic, who loved animals, children and old people, and who was reluctantly violent only in response to the presence of evil - i.e. the "Bad Guy", who he always dispatched in the end. How sweet it was! How neat and how simple!

And for a long time it was adequate. Part of the reason for the renewed interest in the old Westerns today is, I believe, a product of our anxiety at our very complex ethical situation. The same might be said about the old radio programs that are enjoying a renascence. And for me, nothing can beat the old World War II movies that bravely defined good and evil in very simple terms. It's nostalgia, of course, but at least part of it is the deep awareness that we're in trouble today morally: that the simple common denominators of yesterday are gone forever, and that our brave new world is demanding more from us ethically than any generation of men before us.

For we are a generation that saw the romance of war turn into the unbelievable destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the stalemate of Korea, and the daily bombing of villages and hamlets all over South East Asia. We've heard that often enough, but I think we need to be reminded of the vast difference between the heroism of Normandy and Omaha Beach, and a protective reaction strike against a Cambodian village, executed by American Phantom jets whose bombs are guided by radar and laser. We are a generation that has had to come to terms with that.

We have had to deal with all the complexity brought about by technology: we have had to adjust to a society in which success and instant gratification are the accepted moral standards: a society that has just out-grown the simple virtues of the past.

Ethical questions don't come at us in the form of the unshaven stage coach bandit anymore. Rather, they come in new forms and shapes and styles, such as: heart transplants and the definition of death: therapeutic abortion - abortion on demand - or no abortion at all: euthanasia on the sustaining of life's vital signs by way of tubes, pumps and electric stimulators: bombing by radar - defoliation - My Lai: or ultimately - the bomb - when, where and by whom?

As I was putting this together in my mind, the Journal and Courier lent a helping hand by publishing a front page that could be a study document in the ethical dilemmas of contemporary America. Article one dealt with the Watergate incident, involving the

electronic surveillance of a political party by a campaign organization. Article two dealt with the untimely resignation of a high official in the Department of Agriculture in the middle of the Russian Wheat Deal, and his emergence in the upper echelon of a grain company that was a major beneficiary of the deal. Article three announced a raise in Railroad Pensions which spot lights the tremendous moral dilemma of aging in our nation: a real problem for millions of people - part of whom are still here because of sophisticated medical technology and an abundance of food, but many of whom simply have no place - no meaningful reason to go on existing.

II So we find ourselves in a new situation characterized by complexity - ethical stickiness. In additon to that - at the same time the issues were getting tougher, the traditional authority figures or structures in our culture were loosing credibility.

Part of my training as a young boy - and I expect part of yours as well - was to respect authority. That was my father's ultimate moral imperative. Respect it - listen to it -obey it - whenever it appears: in school, church, scouts, athletics, police, government - and of course - him. Dialogue regarding the legitimacy of his decisions in my home was very simple and brief: - it went like this, "Because I said so, that's why." On the back side of our report cards was a section called "citizenship", - a list of every conceivable kind of classroom vice. He could handle things like, "Talks out of turn" or "Doesn't follow directions." My waterloo was about third or fourth down the list ' "Doesn't respect authority". When that was checked I was in very hot water.

Now, I'm not making fun of that. It served him well - and me too, I believe, and I love him for it. But for better or worse, that's not where it is today. The once sacred halls of authority are just not held to be sacred anymore. On measure, I think that's good. But it does create a further dilemma when we think about religious or Christian Ethics. The point is that "religious morality" is not granted authority simply because it's religious anymore. That day is gone. When the Pope, for instance, reaffirms the Church's historic stand against artifical contraception nobody pays much attention. Or when a minister - or a church body - pontificates about the morality of an X-rated movie - nobody cares much.

So, here we are - in a brand new situation that nobody's ever been in before, with

the props pulled out from under the old authorities, with a monumental amount of hand-wringing going on, with people wondering what will become of us and thanking God that they don't have to live in the next generation, and generally having a good time playing that old parlor game called "Ain't . it awful!"

My deepest conviction is that the time is now for the Church to be deeply and aggressively involved in the ethical turmoil: not simply by repeating the old formulas that ignore the newness of the situation: not certainly by parroting the latest fad in the name of Christian Freedom and a faith that's really "with it". But by going down into the valley where life is lived today - by taking seriously the fact that more is demanded of us ethically than ever before - and by bringing to bear in every situation all the ammunition we have - namely the witness of the Bible, the experience of our own history, and the Good News of a Gospel that seeks not to repress and restrict, but to set us free to become fully, joyfully and morally men.

Thus, a series of sermons this fall, on the topic "Ethics for Modern Christians:" or more accurately, a succession of probes or soundings that will raise more questions than they solve, but that, hopefully will stimulate you to do some careful thinking and examining in order to discover where you are and where you want to be ethically.

In the time remaining today I should like to begin by offering briefly three basic understandings that provide the foundation for any Christian approach to the question of ethics.

First, Christian Ethics are ethics of response. In the Old Testament the law begins, not with a rule or regulation - but with a positive affirmation about God. The Shema, repeated by the faithful across the centures, reads, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might"; "The Ten Commandments, likewise, begin with theology not morality, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage". Ethics begins, Biblically, with God, - with his oneness, with his gracious activity toward men. Men are to obey the law - to be moral, then, not in order to please God, but in gratitude because God has already done something gracious. Now, that's very redimentary, but it's also the point at which we usually turn the system around.

Ethics, we assume, are the way to earn favor with God, to win a place in heaven, or to avoid somekind of misfortune. And because we've reversed the basis - our ethical systems come out pretty negative - a list of sins to avoid. But Bibilically, ethical behavior is positive - something done, not something not done: it is an act of gratitude to the God who has already shown that he is gracious.

Second, the Old and New Testaments insist that there can be no separating of what a man believes and what he does. Biblically, there is no such thing as a set of standards for Sunday and another, more pragmatic set of rules for the rest of the week. Again - pretty rudimentary, and again a point at which we usually turn it around. We're very much inclined to fall in line with Archie Bunker, who recently was caught not reporting income to the I.R.S. because it was money earned on the Sabbath.Becausewhat we do on Sunday doesn't really have anything to do with how we conduct our affairs on Monday.

The genius of the Hebrew prophets was in seeing the hypocricy of a religion that became detached from common every day behavior. Our Old Testament Lesson this morning summarizes the point: "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousan rivers of oil?... He has showed you, O man, what is good: and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" For those rams and all that oil, substitute a thousand recitations of the Apostle's Creed, and ten thousand prayers of confession.

Third, Christian ethics are ethics of concern, compassion or caring. Once more - a rather rudimentary understanding, but again a very critical point in the new situation of twentieth century America. For we live in a culture that no longer seems to put a premium on personal, individualized compassion. A T.V. commercial advertising steel belted tires does so on the basis that no one is stopping along the road side to help anymore. And if you do care - if you hurt when you see someone else hurting - if a hungry child makes you a might uncomfortable as you sit down to dinner - if you have the capacity to feel the despair and pain of an A.D.C. mother - if you can hurt along with a black mother whose child has just been called a dirty nigger - you are going to be called a "bleeding heart" - which, ironically, now means naive, soft, unreal. You're not going to win friends and influence people because you're bleeding inside on behalf of the disfigured children

of Vietnam. In fact, you will be rejected or patronized or barely tolerated as a "do-gooder" - a label that has somehow come to be negative.

In our New Testament lesson this morning ~~Lazarus~~ Richman is in hell and the ~~poor man~~ Lazarus in heaven: not because ~~Lazarus~~ r.m. did anything wrong. There is no indication that he stole anything or that he treated the poor man unkindly. All he did was fail to be compassionate, to care.

Any Christian Ethic must finally come to rest on Jesus Christ. Everything about him - his teaching, his parables, his life itself, keeps insisting that to be good is to care, personally,warmly, lovingly, painfully, helpfully for a neighbor in need.

One writer put it this way, and I can't improve on his words: "Here is the difference which Christianity made. Jesus came to tell men of a God who cares desparately, a God who is involved in the human situation,a God who...is afflicted with our afflictions, a God who is concerned." (Wm. Barclay, Ethics in a Permissive Society. P. 31)

Ultimately, that's where it rests then. In subsequent weeks we shall be exploring the implications. But for now, at the outset, in a brand new cultural situation,with the old authorities gone, God's call to you and me - his ethical demand - is very simple. It is this - "For Christ's sake, Care." AMEN

Father, we need help to live our lives honestly and faithfully. We need the support of each other in the Church. We need the wisdom of the scripture. But most of all we need the power of your presence. Grant it to us: in the name of Jesus Christ. AMEN